

Short communications

Observations on the trend of the Pink-backed Pelican *Pelecanus rufescens* at breeding colonies, eastern Uganda

The Pink-backed Pelican *Pelecanus rufescens* occurs in sub-Saharan Africa, Madagascar and the southern Red Sea (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). It has an extremely large range with a relatively stable population, making its conservation status of least concern (BirdLife



**Figure 1.** An Adult and young of *Pelecanus rufescens* on *Milicia excelsa* tree at North-Road Primary School. Picture taken on 9 June 2013 at 09:30.

2013). *P. rufescens* has been known to breed in Uganda as early as 1939, with official records made in subsequent years (Din & Eltringham 1973, Pomeroy 2002, Nachuha 2007, Nachuha & John 2012). Breeding, particularly in eastern Uganda, starts in March when the main rains begin and ends in July. For the past seven years, *P. rufescens* has bred at mixed colony sites in eastern Uganda. In 2005 breeding was recorded at three sites, namely North-Road Primary School in Mbale town, Busolwe Hospital grounds and Mbale railway quarters, whose exact locations are shown in Table 1. The presence of Mvule trees *Milicia excelsa* at these sites seemed to be one of the attractions (see also Nachuha & Quinn 2012 and Fig. 1). Three years later *P. rufescens* was no longer breeding at either Busolwe Hospital or

Mbale railway quarters because the nesting trees had been cut down, presumably causing a local migration of the birds to other unknown locations.

**Table 1.** Breeding colonies at which numbers of nests of *Pelecanus rufescens* were recorded.

Breeding site	Lat/Long	Year						
		2005	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Busolwe Hospital grounds	0°50'N, 33°57'E	7	0	0	0	0	0	0
Butaleja district Headquarters	0°55'N, 33°56'E	0	0	0	0	0	6	4
North-Road Primary School	1°4'N, 34°10' E	182	137	137	120	85	90	127
Mbale railway quarters	1°4'N, 34°10' E	30	0	0	0	12	0	0

Results in Table 1 show site fidelity of *P.rufescens* to the main breeding colony at North-Road Primary School, where numbers have fluctuated over the years. This colony also supported other species such as Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis aethiopica*, Yellow-billed Stork *Mycteria ibis*, African Spoonbill *Platalea alba* and Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala*. However, since 2010, these other species have left this colony, apparently for the Mbale railway quarters site about 3 km

away, where numbers have recently increased. It is difficult to guess the underlying cause of this move considering that the colony to which these birds have relocated has trees such as Jambula *Syzygium guineense* and Cassia *Cassia spectabilis* that are weak and already heavily populated with breeding birds of the same species together with Long-tailed Cormorants *Phalacrocorax africanus*. This colony is also more threatened by settlement and other human activities.

On 4 April 2011 and 23 May 2013 we observed solitary individuals and loose groups of *P. rufescens* feeding on small adult fish, mainly *Tilapia* and *Haplochromis*, at the Mbale town sewage lagoons located about 3 km away. The limited observations at the floor of the breeding colony further indicated that *P. rufescens* fed exclusively on fish (see Fig. 2), most likely obtained from these lagoons.



**Figure 2.** Fish remains found on the ground of the breeding colony of *P. rufescens*, at North-Road Primary school. Picture taken on 9 June 2013 at 10:15.

The North-Road Primary School colony seems to be robust because the birds nest there every year. However, its future is not assured given that it is located at a school whose management may consider expanding their infrastructure at any time and conceivably cutting down of the six *Milicia excelsa* trees. Should this happen, then *P. rufescens* could struggle to find an alternative site considering that there are hardly any *M. excelsa* trees left in eastern Uganda, and if there are any, they may not be located within quick and easy access to food.

There has been a general decline in the breeding population of *P. rufescens* over the years. This may be attributed to a combination of factors, such as loss of breeding trees and possibly the frequent storms that lead to the death of the immature birds. This decline has conservation implications for this species and others. However, our effort to monitor the breeding sites on a yearly basis enables us to build a dataset that will inform the future, and also gives us an opportunity to stress to the local people the importance of the Mvule tree to the survival of *P. rufescens* and to the environment in general. This approach could be adopted by other researchers in areas where birds face similar threats.

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## Further remarks concerning the Little Egret complex in East Africa

Little Egret-like birds that occur in Africa have been the subject of debate for decades, and remain taxonomically highly controversial. Three forms in Kenya (*garzetta*, *schistacea* and *dimorpha*) largely behave as separate species and are generally easy to identify, but confusion remains as to whether *Egretta garzetta* in Africa is monotypic or whether it represents a polytypic species embracing some or all of the forms *dimorpha*, *schistacea* and *gularis*.

In Europe the Western Reef Egret (*E. gularis*) and the Little Egret (*E. garzetta*) are usually recognized as separate species (Cramp & Simmons 1977, Hancock & Elliott 1978, Payne 1979, Brown *et al.* 1982, Sibley & Monroe 1990). Two, sometimes three, subspecies have been recognized for the Western Reef Egret, all of which have a mainly coastal distribution and are dimorphic with dark and white individuals occurring in the same population, together with intermediates in variable proportions. These are: nominate *gularis* in West Africa; *schistacea* in East Africa and the Indian sub-continent, and a third form *dimorpha* in the Malagasy Region and coastal East Africa which has been variably considered as a race of either *gularis* or *garzetta* or a species, Dimorphic Egret, in its own right (Dubois & Yesou 1995).

The race *schistacea* (known earlier as *asha*), is typically a bird of the Indian sub-continent, while in Africa it occurs throughout the Persian Gulf from the southern Sinai south to the Somali and north Kenya coasts. Elsewhere an inland population extends (alongside typical Little Egrets) down the Rift Valley to Lake Turkana in northern Kenya with vagrants reported south to lakes Nakuru, Naivasha, Albert and Edward. From southern Kenya south through coastal and off-shore islands in Tanzania to the Comores and Madagascar, *schistacea* is replaced by the form *dimorpha*.

The introduction of several hundred *schistacea* from Pakistan into Germany and Austria during 1980–82 resulted in several escapees, some of which were of the dark-morph variety and subsequent sightings of dark egrets along the Mediterranean coasts may have referred to such individuals (Wust 1983, Cistac 1984).

Typical characteristics of Little Egrets (*E. garzetta sensu stricto*) and Western Reef-Egrets (*E. gularis/schistacea*) have been described which should allow ready separation in the field.

- i) General overall appearance: Little Egrets are typically slimmer and more graceful. No dark morph individuals are recorded in East Africa, while in *gularis/schistacea/dimorpha* populations a high percentage of dark morph birds are always present.
- ii) Bill shape and colour: Little Egret has a long, narrow, straight, black bill compared